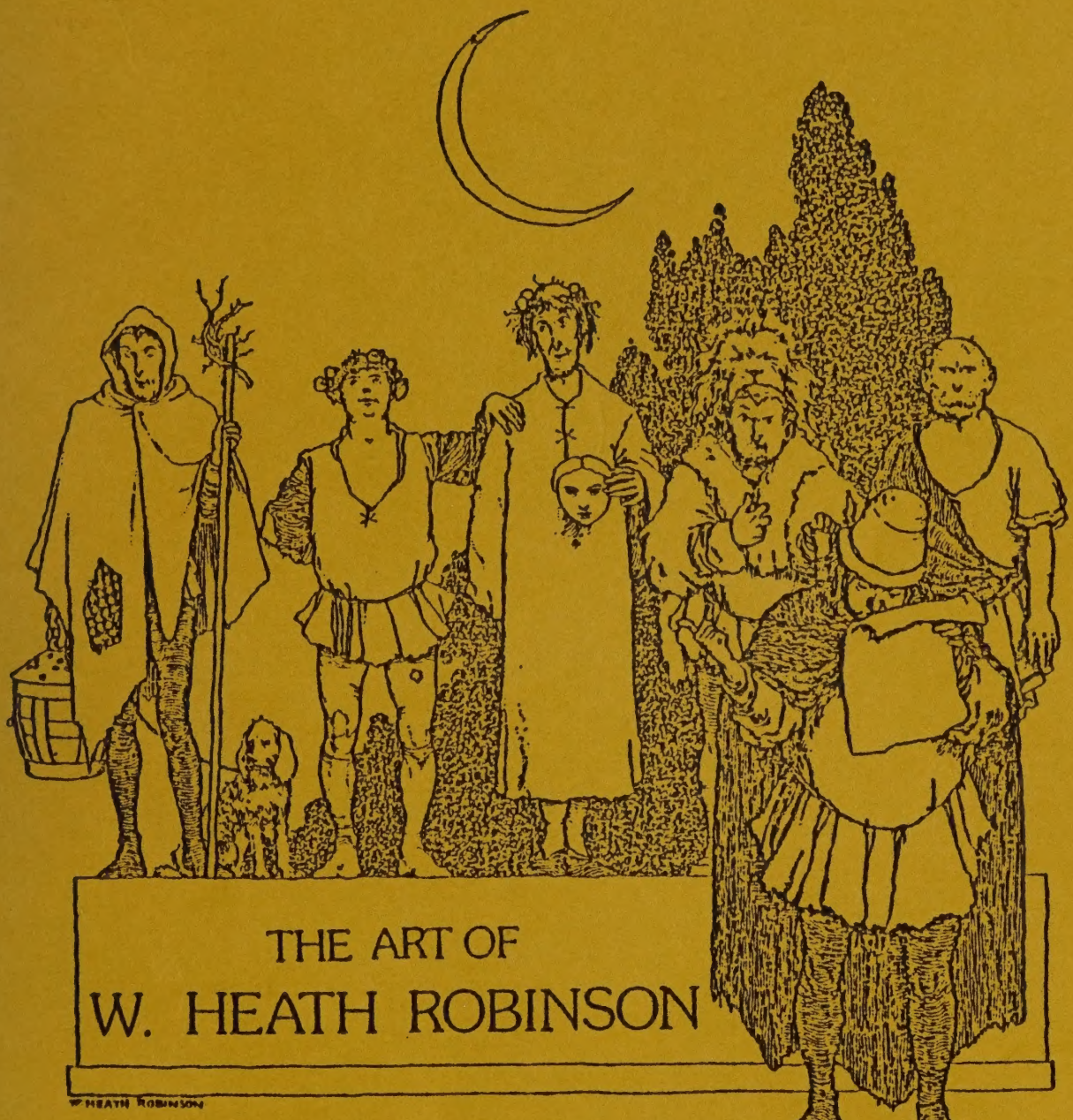

THE ART OF
W. HEATH ROBINSON

W. Heath Robinson: "A Caricature of Himself!"

THE ART OF

W I L L I A M H E A T H R O B I N S O N

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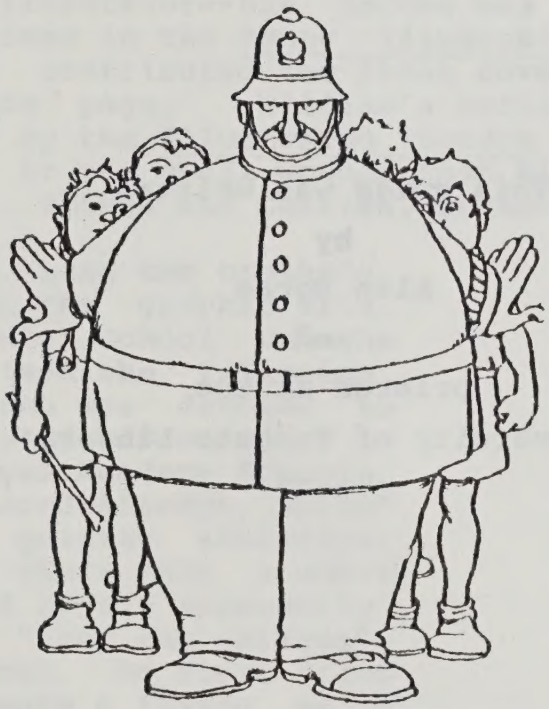
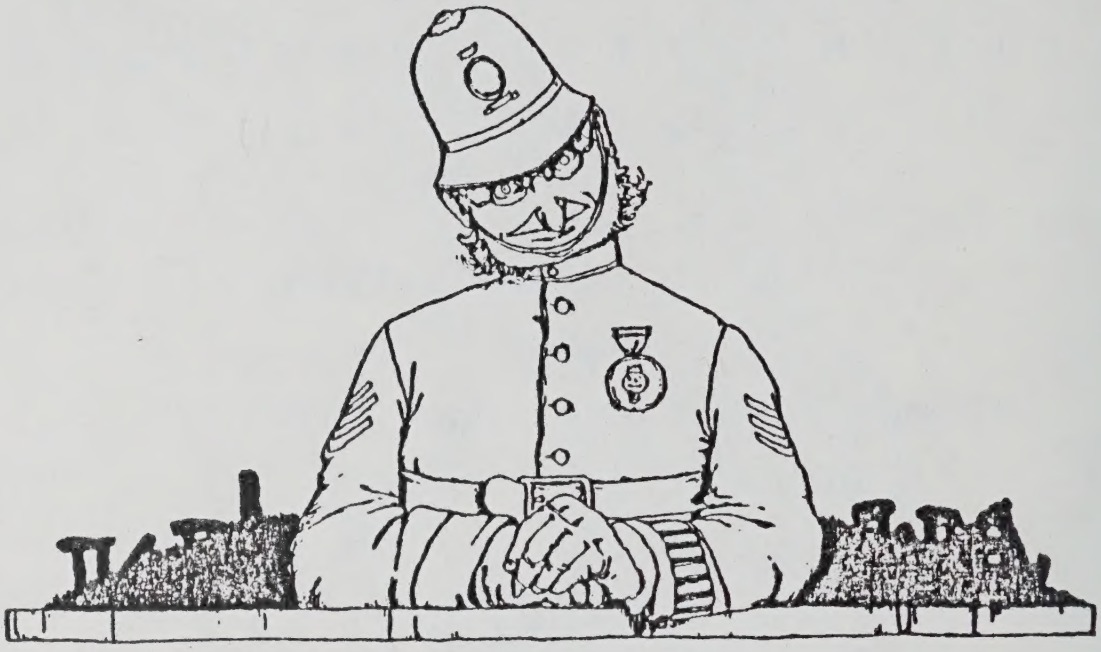
Guide to an exhibition
in the
Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library
University of Toronto



April 1 - May 14, 1977



This guide was written
by
Alan Horne
and
printed at the
University of Toronto Library
c 1977

William Heath Robinson was born in Hornsey, north London, England, on May 31, 1872, on of six children of Thomas and Eliza Robinson. (Eliza was the daughter of a William Heath.) William's grandfather, Thomas Robinson, the patriarch of the family, began his working life as a bookbinder in his home town of Newcastle-on-Tyne. Among his customers were George Stephenson, the inventor of the steam locomotive, and the wood engraver, Thomas Bewick. This Thomas Robinson left the north of England and came to London to "make his fortune", whereupon he gave up bookbinding and became a wood engraver for such journals as Good Words and the London Journal. William's father, Thomas, started work as an engraver and later became an illustrator--his income was derived mainly from his illustrations in the Penny Illustrated Paper, to which he generally contributed the front cover illustration and a double inside page. William's uncle, Charles, was similarly employed by the Illustrated London News. With such antecedents, it was small wonder that William and his two older brothers, Thomas and Charles, became illustrators.

Robinson, like these two brothers, planned a career in the graphic arts. He left Islington High School when he was fifteen to attend the Islington Scool of Art, which was devoted to securing for its students entrance to the prestigious Royal Academy Schools. In 1890, on his second attempt, Robinson succeeded in gaining admission; however he stayed there only a short time, being bored by the apparently unending drawing "from the antique". After leaving school, he first tried unsuccessfully to make a living as a landscape painter, and then was fortunate enough to have some drawings accepted for publication in Cassell's Little Folks magazine and Good Words. His first book illustrations were published in 1897, but it was not until the publication of Uncle Lubin in 1902 and the start of his advertising work for commerce and industry in 1902 that

From Danish Fairy Tales and Legends of Hans Christian Andersen. 1897

Robinson's financial position was assured. He now felt able to take on family responsibilities and in 1903 he married Josephine Latey, daughter of John Latey, the art and literary editor of the Penny Illustrated Paper. This marriage was apparently very happy and produced five children--four sons and a daughter.

From 1902 (Uncle Lubin) to 1915 (The Water Babies) was the period of growing accomplishment in Robinson's work on serious book illustrations, but he was becoming increasingly involved in producing his drawings of absurdly comic contraptions, and after 1915 most of his energies must have gone into these. In addition to the financial success of "Heath Robinson contraptions", the artist must have gained a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction from this work, for he had a whimsical sense of humour.

In addition to drawing for books and journals and for his commercial employers, Robinson appeared on radio and television; he produced scenery for the old Empire and Alhambra theatres which used to stand in Leicester Square; he painted murals for the Knickerbocker Bar and the children's room on the liner, the "Empress of Britain"; and in 1934 he designed a "Heath Robinson" house for the "Daily Mail" Ideal Homes Exhibition in London. He worked right through to the end of his life, mixing the serious with the comic, and died in Highgate, London, on September 13, 1944.

* *

From the start, Robinson illustrated stories for children as well as for adults, and his work appeared in numerous periodicals as well as in books. His first book illustrations were published in 1897 in Danish Fairy Tales and Legends of Hans Christian Andersen, The Giant Crab and Other Tales From India, and Don Quixote. Maybe he did not show his talent as early as his brother Charles did, but compared to William's art, Charles's stood still. William's early work is very much like that of his other brother, Thomas--rather stilted, 'thin' and pedestrian in imagination--but William's illustrations in the early books, for example Danish Fairy Tales and The Queen's Story Book (1898), do give some indication of future development. Humour is often present; the draughtsmanship is good with real individuality being depicted in the faces of the characters; the artist's viewpoint is often original; and the composition is interesting. The illustrations to The Giant Crab seem more assured and show these features more clearly. In his autobiography, My Line of Life, Robinson wrote that the stories in this book "were so naively and humorously written, I have seldom

From The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe. 1900

had a subject to illustrate that made a stronger appeal to me." He goes on to say that "As with most of the books I illustrated in those early days, I would like to illustrate them all over again." (p. 93)

After these early books, Robinson's art became more decorative, showing the influence of his contemporaries and predecessors, as he readily admits. Beardsley and the art nouveau movement may be most clearly seen in Robinson's The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (1900) with its excesses and exaggerations, its ornamentation and the use of large areas of plain black or white. The Poe was published by George Bell and Sons in their "Endymion" series of poets, a series made famous by the illustrations of such artists as Anning Bell and Garth Jones. Robinson confesses his debt to these and others--"Aubrey Beardsley, Sime, Walter Crane, Anning Bell, my brother Charles, Garth Jones and many others . . . the influence that all of these had upon me is reflected in my illustrations to Edgar Allan Poe's poems." (My Line of Life, p.120) It is interesting to note that Walter Crane's important work, Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New, was first published by Bell in 1896. This makes reference to all the artists that Robinson quotes (except for Sime) and in addition emphasizes the influence that Japanese art had on illustrators during the period. In Robinson's work, the overhead viewpoint of the artist, the assymetrical design of the illustration and a diagonal emphasis can frequently be seen and may be due to the great interest shown in Japanese art in the 1890's.

For these early books, Robinson worked in black and white only, but his development as an artist reached true accomplishment during the first part of the twentieth century, when the lavishly produced "gift book" flourished, with its tipped-in colour plates and gilt, decorated binding. Some books which Robinson illustrated follow this fashion--Twelfth Night (1908), A Song of the English (1909), Bill the Minder (1912), another edition of Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales (1913), A Midsummer Night's Dream (1914) and Perrault's Old Time Stories (1921). Twelfth Night was the first gift book that Robinson illustrated and it seems evident that for the artist the colouring was of secondary consideration to the line drawings--the tipped-in colour plates are rather gloomy. This book may not be as successful as the other big two productions of 1908--Rackham's A Midsummer Night's Dream and Dulac's The Tempest--but it is not a failure.

Perhaps Robinson's best work was done for the 1913 Andersen, for A Midsummer Night's Dream and for two books for children which he wrote as well as illustrated--The

From The Adventures of Uncle Lubin. 1902

Adventures of Uncle Lubin (1902) and Bill the Minder (1912). These stories are simple, funny, absurd and quite charming. Uncle Lubin's adventures are mainly concerned with his search for his nephew Peter, a chubby baby who had the misfortune to have been carried off by a Bag-bird (Heath Robinson's name for a pelican.) The story of Bill the Minder is a simple tale or series of tales about the wanderings of the King of Troy and a boot-cleaner called Bill, who becomes the Minder (that is, the Baby-sitter) to a bad-tempered family of a bad-tempered mushroom gatherer. Apart from a coloured frontispiece and coloured initials throughout, Uncle Lubin is illustrated in black and white. Each two-page opening was designed as a whole and the book is a great success, the text and the pictures ideally complementing each other. Colour plates as well as line drawings are used in Bill the Minder, and these plates are among Robinson's best. Even so, they seem less a part of the book than the black and white illustrations, which are treated in the simplest fashion, being mostly mere outlines which perfectly suit the naive tales. The Hans Andersen is a total success, with exquisite, well-printed colour plates and black and white illustrations either absurdly humorous as in Bill the Minder, or endowed with the decorative charm and gaiety of the later A Midsummer Night's Dream. (The plates in Robinson's version of The Water Babies which also appeared in 1913 are nowhere near as good and are badly printed into the bargain.)

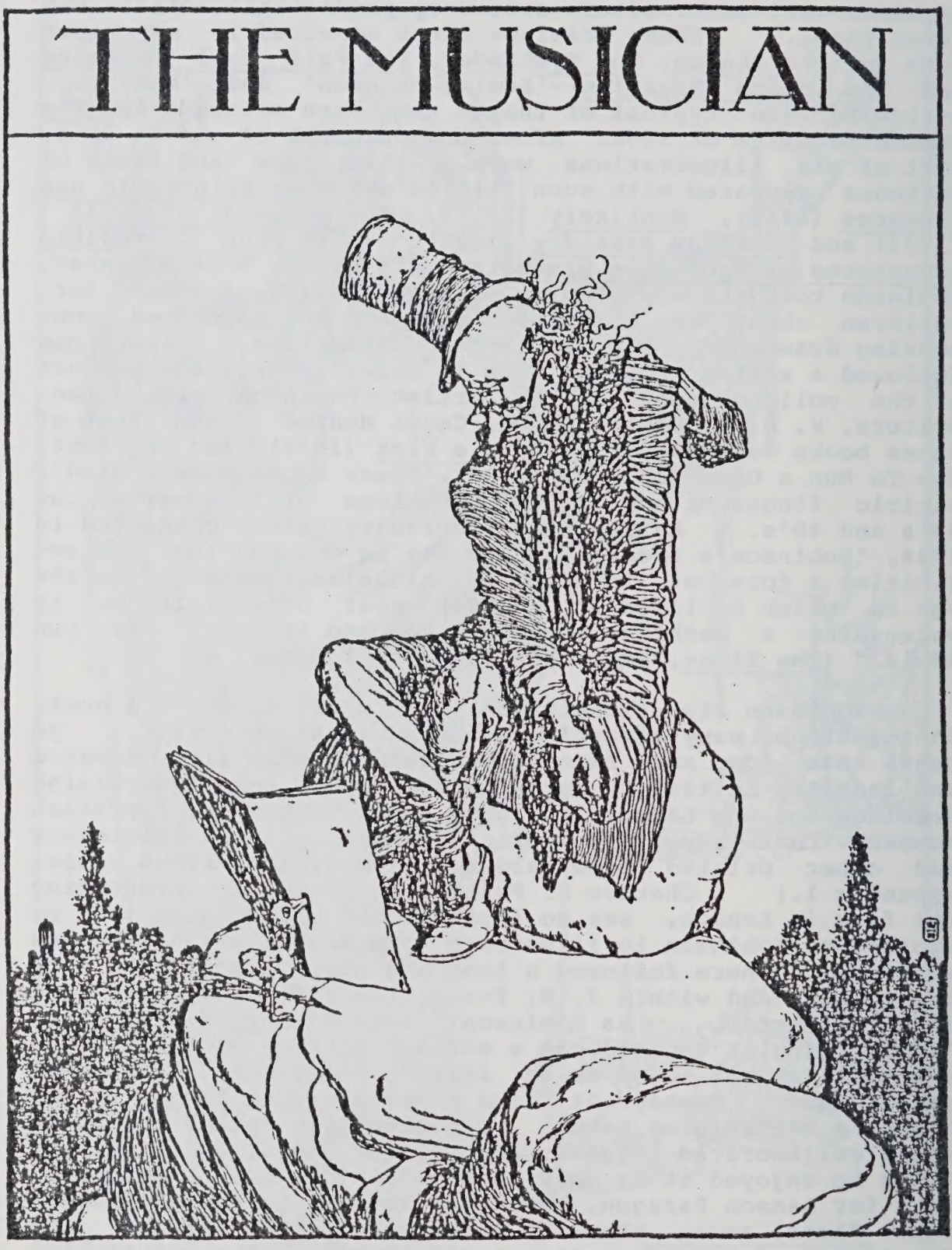
In the same year that Uncle Lubin appeared (1902), the publishers J. M. Dent and Sons produced another Robinson-illustrated Don Quixote. The illustrations in this version are much more spirited and original than those in the 1897 production and look forward to the drawings Robinson did for a two-volume Works of Rabelais (1904), published by Grant Richards. The Rabelais drawings are vigorous and earthy with the cruel, vacuous faces of the peasants particularly memorable. Robinson made nearly one hundred full-page illustrations and over one hundred and twenty head- and tail-pieces for this book.

Both Bill the Minder and Uncle Lubin strongly show Robinson's sense of humour and of fun, his whimsicality and and inventiveness, but even before Bill the Minder appeared, Robinson had begun drawing cartoons and depicting the sort of comic contraptions which we now call by his name. These contraptions are very complicated. They exist usually for some very absurd purpose, such as counting peas or freezing a herring. Small, solemn men control levers or work windlasses at vital points, often sitting on ricketty ladders. Any wheels are not quite round and pulleys consist of short lengths of string knotted together. In case there could be any misunderstanding, dotted lines often indicate how the

From The Works of Rabelais. 1904

machines will work, after some very predictable action has taken place. These drawings first appeared in magazines such as The Sketch, The Bystander, The Pall Mall Magazine and The London Magazine--'Seeing London' and 'How to Agricult' are typical of these and were sections in The London Magazine of 1908. After the outbreak of war in 1914, most of his illustrations were of this type and books of cartoons appeared with such titles as Some Frightful War Pictures (1915), Hunlikely (1916), The Humours of Golf (1923) and Railway Ribaldry (1935). In The Incredible Adventures of Professor Branestawm (1933), by Norman Hunter, Robinson took the opportunity of illustrating a book for children about an eccentric inventor and produced some amusing drawings of his complicated inventions. There now followed a series of nine "How To . . ." books, the product of the collaboration of the artist Robinson with two writers, K. R. G. Browne and H. Cecil Hunt. The first of these books was How To Live In a Flat (1936) and the last, How To Run a Communal Home (1943). These books poke a mildly satiric finger at some of the problems of life during the 30's and 40's. As The Times' obituary writer commented in 1944, "Robinson's special genius lay in discovering and exploiting a form of incongruity singularly relevant to the age in which he lived . . . (his) great originality was in persuading a machine-conscious age to laugh at its own idols." (The Times, September 14, 1944.)

Robinson also illustrated, with drawings of his comic contraptions, many advertising and publicity booklets. He began this long and fascinating relationship with commerce and industry in 1903 by agreeing to produce some advertising drawings for the Lamson Paragon Supply Company, a British company that supplied duplicate books, printed stationery and other printed material for commercial firms. (See Appendix 1.) Charles E. Potter, a Canadian representing the firm in London, was so impressed by Uncle Lubin that he approached Robinson to illustrate some advertisements he was writing. There followed a long and happy association with the company and with a J. M. Evans, later the company's Managing Director. As Robinson wrote in My Line of Life, "Advertising, I am told, is a serious science, and I have no doubt it is, but to me as an illustrator it has always been great fun. Perhaps at times I saw too much fun in it and needed a restraining hand . . . However, my friend J.M.Evans and I collaborated together happily for years, and I like to think he enjoyed it as much as I did." (p. 104) Apart from work for Lamson Paragon, Robinson produced booklets for many other firms, among them the Practical Etching Service (The Gentle Art of Reproducing), Ruston-Bucyrus (The Gentle Art of Excavating), Asbestos Cement Building Products Ltd. (The Making of Asbestos Cement Roofings), Moss Bros (Behind the



From Bill the Minder. 1912

Scenes at Moss Bros with Heath Robinson), and for Connolly Bros., Curriers (Heath Robinson on Leather; Connolly Land; Leather for Ever; and several others).

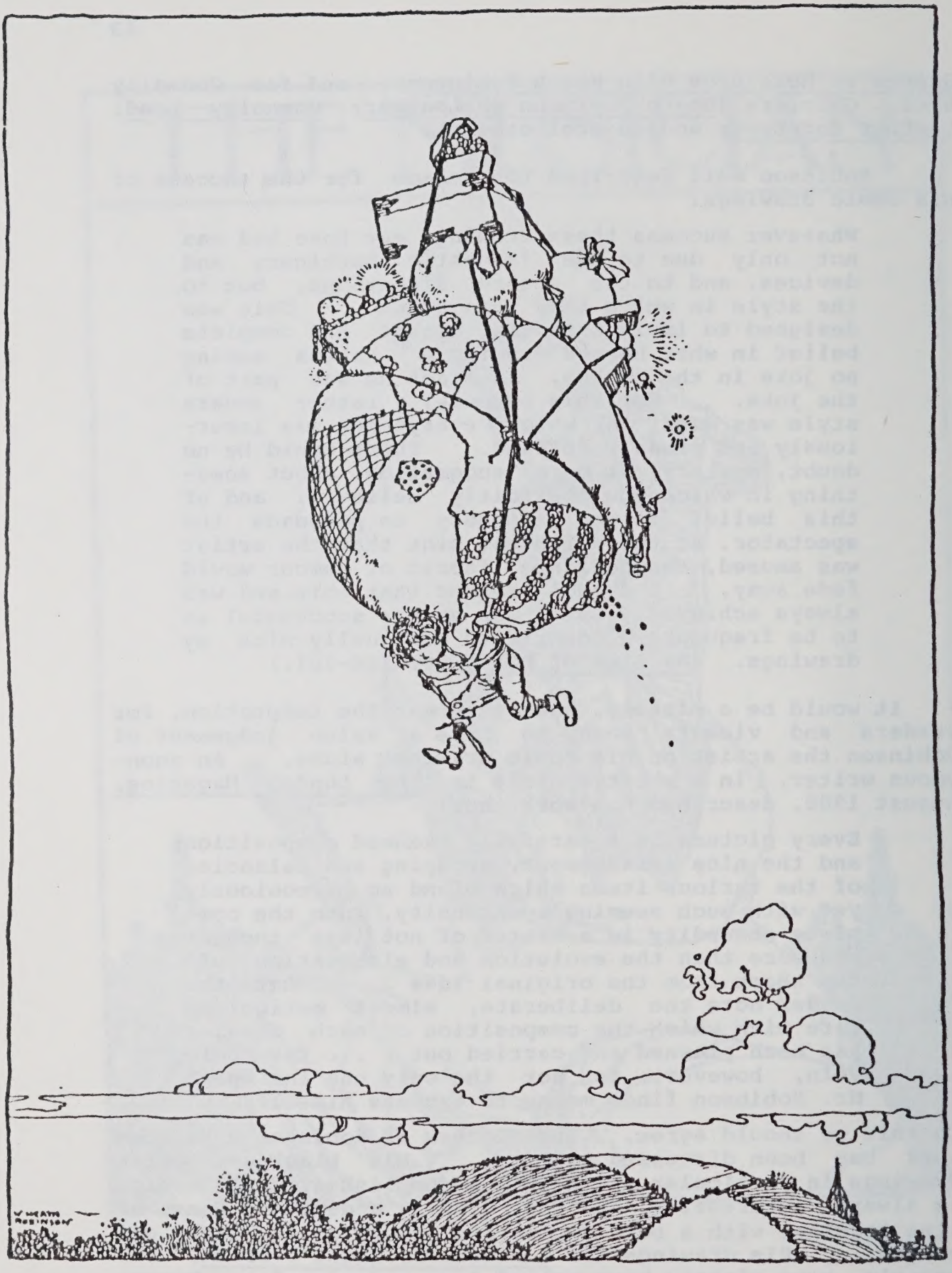
Robinson well described the reason for the success of his comic drawings:

> Whatever success these drawings may have had was not only due to the fantastic machinery and devices, and to the absurd situations, but to the style in which they were drawn. This was designed to imply that the artist had complete belief in what he was drawing. He was seeing no joke in the matter, in fact he was part of the joke. For this purpose, a rather severe style was used, in which everything was laboriously and clearly defined. There could be no doubt, mystery, or mere suggestion about something in which you implicitly believed, and of this belief it was necessary to persuade the spectator. At the slightest hint that the artist was amused, the delicate fabric of humour would fade away. I do not pretend that this end was always achieved, but I was so far successful as to be frequently identified personally with my drawings. (My Line of Life, pp. 106-107.)

It would be a mistake, however great the temptation, for readers and viewers today to base a value judgement of Robinson the artist on his comic drawings alone. An anonymous writer, in a short article in The London Magazine, August 1908, described his work thus:

> Every picture is a carefully planned composition; and the nice arrangement, grouping and balancing of the various items which blend so harmoniously, yet with such seeming spontaneity, into the complete absurdity is a matter of not less thought and care than the evolution and elaboration of the theme from the original idea . . . Let the reader note the deliberate, almost meticulous care with which the composition of each drawing has been planned and carried out . . . The comic vein, however, is not the only one in which Mr. Robinson finds means to express himself.

To this we should agree. The success of Robinson's serious work has been discussed earlier. His black and white drawings in particular are highly accomplished. Their design is always interesting, and they display a delicate sense of line together with a bold decorative use of solid blacks and whites. His drawings for A Midsummer Night's Dream, for example, have rightly been called "pen paintings". Decorativeness and design, fine draughtsmanship, seriousness,



From Old-Time Stories by Charles Perrault. 1921

humour and absurdity--all these features may be seen in his work. It is perhaps not possible to separate Robinson's work into two rigid categories, the serious and the comic, for in his serious illustrations there is usually much wit and humour; and his comic drawings are usually of solemn men attempting to solve some serious problem in however ludicrous a manner. All his work illustrates the compassion of the man himself. As he explained, his humour might be able to "raise a laugh at the ordinary man, at his foibles and difficulties, but it is a brother's laugh in which he could join." (My Line of Life, p. 194.)

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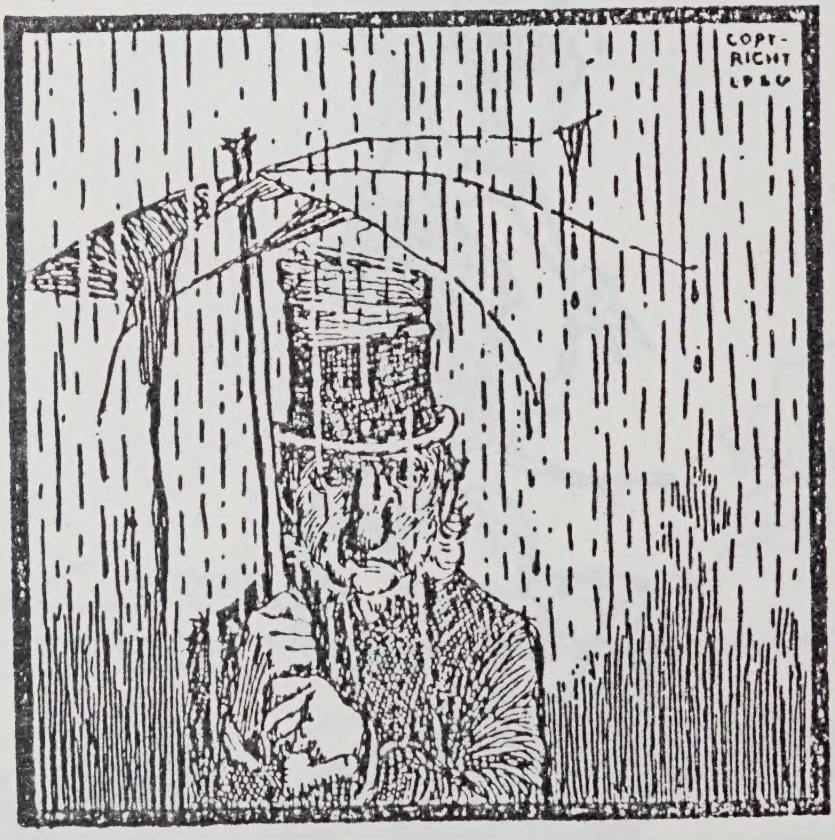

.Advertising for Lamson Paragon Supply Co.

Appendix 1: A Note on the Relationship Between Robinson, C. E. Potter and J. M. Evans.

Lamson Paragon Supply Company Ltd. was a British company formed originally under the name Paragon Check Book Company in 1886 by S. J. Moore of Toronto, who three years earlier had formed Carter & Company in Toronto, today the Moore Corporation Limited. Lamson Paragon Supply Co. Ltd. is today Lamson Industries Ltd., a subsidiary of Moore Corporation.

In 1903 an advertisement appeared in a trade magazine, "Printer's Ink," in which the writer, a young advertising executive, put forward his case in forthright terms. The advertisement was seen by the Manager of the Lamson Paragon subsidiary in Berlin and sent to his Managing Director in London as an example of American advertising. The latter was so impressed that he passed it on to S. J. Moore, who interviewed the writer, no other than Charles E. Potter.

The result was that Potter was engaged by Lamson Paragon as advertising manager in London. How his reading of Uncle Lubin caused him to get in touch with Heath Robinson, how they collaborated and the immediate result, is well told in My Line of Life. The gold sovereigns paid him made a lasting impression on Robinson for he mentions it more than once in letters as well as in his book.

After a year or so, Potter's wife decided that she did not like London very much, so they went home to Toronto. Lamson Paragon were sorry to lose Potter and asked him to recommend someone to take his place. Potter knew a young man from Buffalo, N.Y. (he was then 31), who ran a small print shop with two partners, the White-Evans Penfold Co. John Meath Evans[1] was approached, went to England, liked what he saw and was offered the job. So he sold out his share and sailed back to England in 1905. Ten years later he became Managing Director of the London company, a post he held for 27 years.

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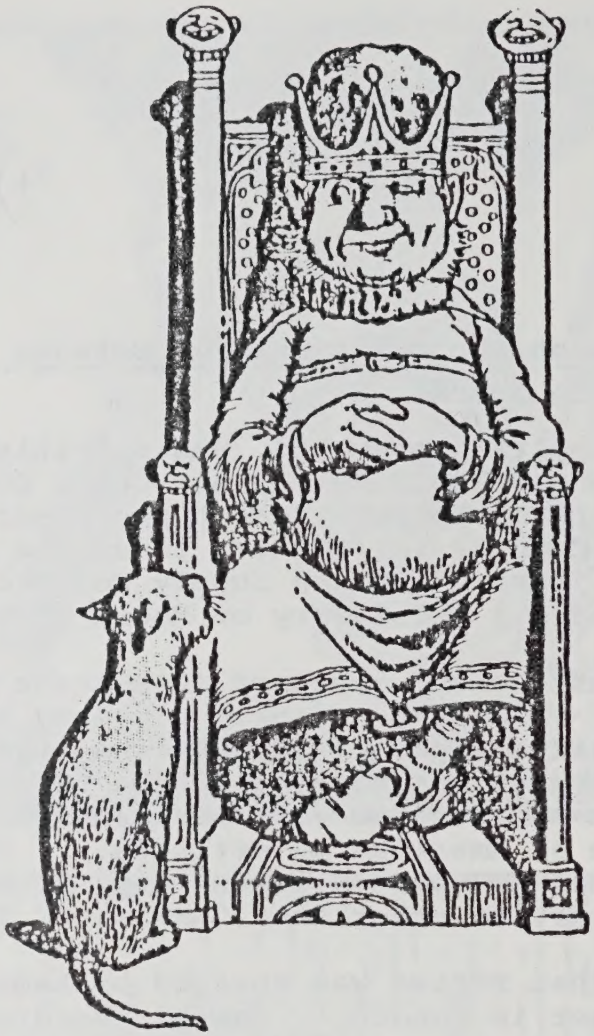
[1] The author of this Appendix 1 is the son of John Meath Evans, and is himself now Chairman of Lamson Industries.

Paragon
Ad-Service



If you were a King

You could not be waited on with more civility and courtesy than you would get at

GOOCH & SONS

:: *FAMILY GROCERS* ::

RANDOLPH ROAD

Ad. No. D 71

Block C.T.746

Advertising for Lamson Paragon Supply Co.

W. Heath Robinson may have had some apprehension as to whether the young American was going to be as easy to get on with as Potter. He soon found out and again describes in his book the relationship. What he does not say is that the business friendship became a very personal one, as evidenced by Evans's membership of the Frothfinders Federation[2], the last meeting of which I am able to trace was in the mid 20s. Several other members of Lamson Paragon staff became Frothfinders, including H. B. Waterworth, a sales representative, who specialised in overseas sales expeditions and whose departures and home-comings seem to have been hilariously celebrated by the Frothfinders. He eventually settled in Australia.

Meanwhile Charles Potter had been given a job in one of S. J. Moore's other enterprises, the City Dairy Company of Toronto. Here he continued to commission Heath Robinson from time to time. About 1906 or 1907, he was seriously injured in the fall of a lift in a building which Moore was putting up and walked with a limp for the rest of his life. He kept in touch with Robinson and as late as 1939 was putting up to him a proposal for a syndicated feature of cartoons and aphorisms under the catchword "think". As far as is known, it never got off the ground.

The work which Robinson did for Lamson Paragon really comes under several headings. First of all there were the designs and illustrations for internally produced advertising. Not very much of this survives. Then there was internal advertising in the trade press such as the "Drapers Record". Some specimens of this can be seen.

Lamson Paragon also had an extensive library of stock illustrations for use on their products, sales books and paper bags. Not infrequently the same block could be used as a stock block or as an advertisement block with merely a change of caption.

Finally the illustrations were also used in stock books such as a daily record book of sales and receipts, where they act as a reminder of the other products sold by the firm. . . .

J-P. R. M. Evans,
14th February, 1977

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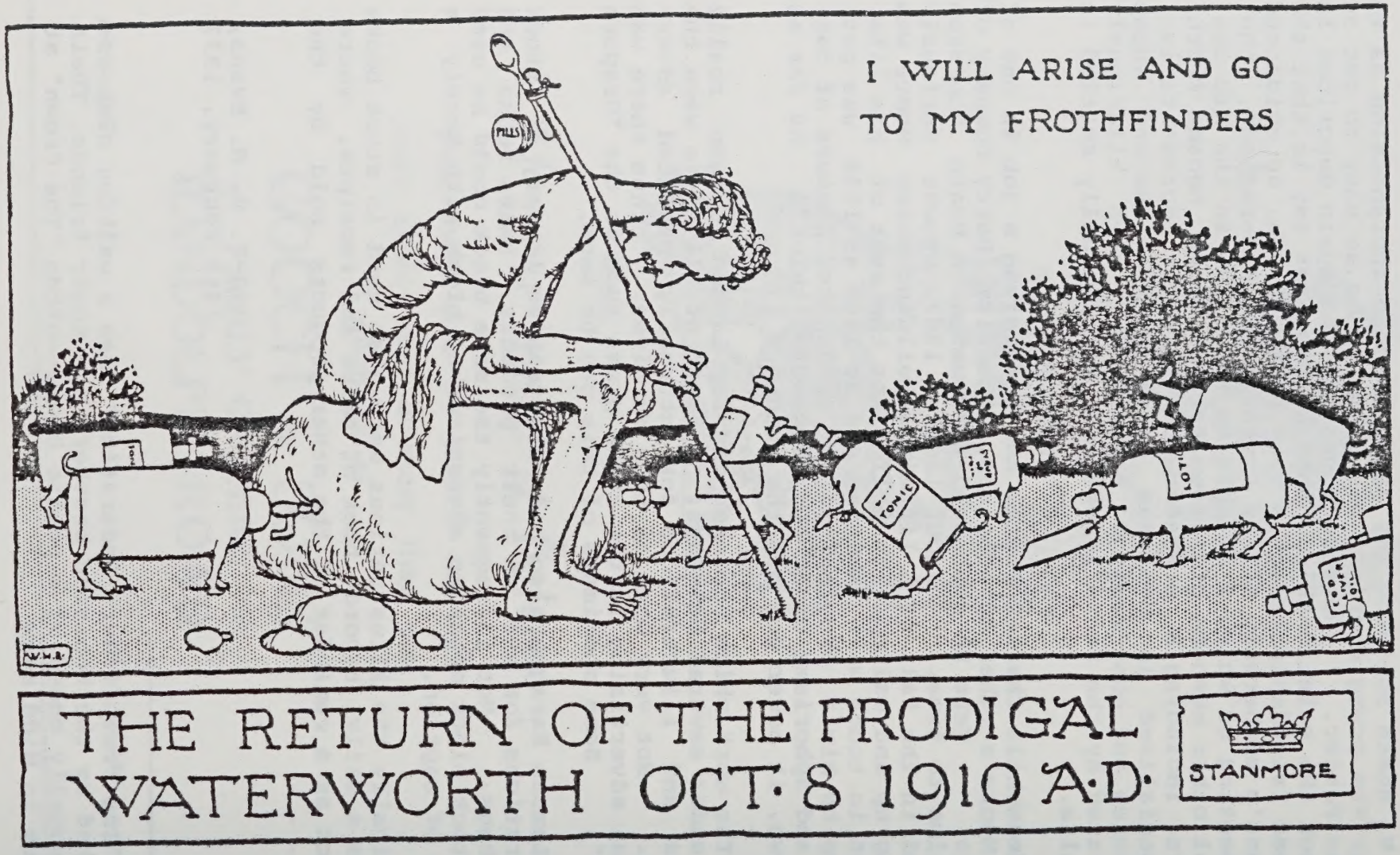
[2]"The Frothfinders Federation" was a walking club established by the Robinson brothers and their friends. Their walks usually ended at a public house--often "The Crown" at Stanmore in Middlesex.



A Card Produced for the Frothfinders Federation.

Appendix 2: Acknowledgements

Most of the material on display comes from either the private collection of the writer or from the University of Toronto Library. However, many individuals and organizations have generously given or lent items which have added a great deal of interest to the exhibition. My special thanks go to Mr. J-P. R. M. Evans, Chairman of Lamson Industries Ltd. (U. K.) for material he brought over from England for this exhibition. Much of this material has not been on public display before and is of considerable interest as examples of Robinson's first advertising work.

I extend my sincere thanks also to the following:-

Connolly Bros.(Curriers) Limited, London, England
"The Daily Mail", London, England
Monk Bretton Books, Toronto
Moss Bros. Limited, Tailors & Outfitters, London, Eng.
Ruston-Bucyrus Limited, Crane and Excavator Manufacturers, Lincoln, England
Toronto Public Libraries (Osborne & Lillian H. Smith Collections)
Trafford Park Estates Limited, Industrial & Commercial Property Developers, Manchester, England
Mr. F.W. Woods, Vice-President & Secretary, The Moore Corporation, Toronto

I wish also to thank my colleagues at the University of Toronto Library for their advice and help in the preparation and production of this guide and the advertising poster, and in the erection of the exhibition. I am particularly grateful for the efforts of Luba Hussel and Karen Taylor, of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library. To all those whose names are omitted, I offer apologies and thanks.

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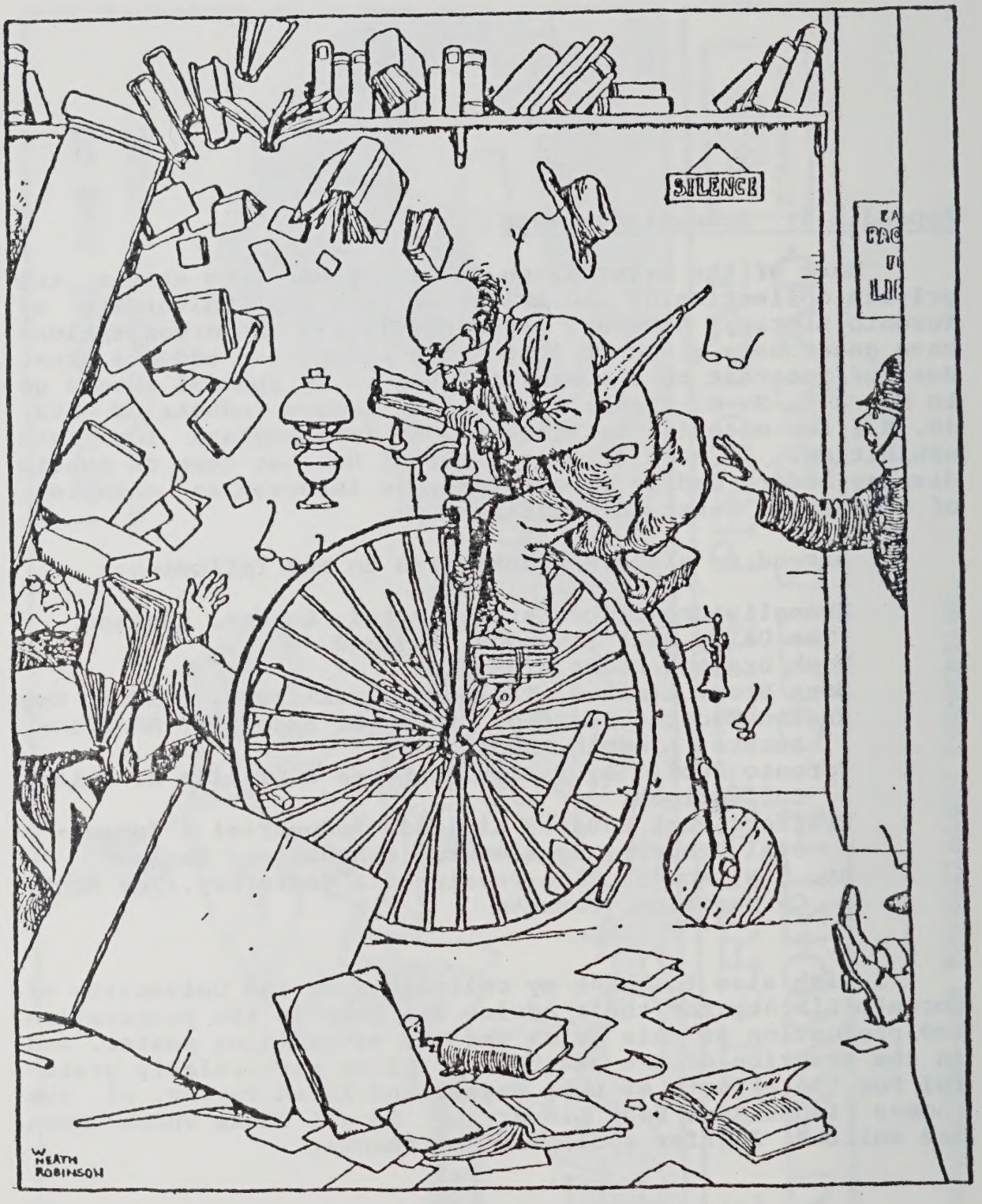

From The Incredible Adventures of Professor Branestawm by Norman Hunter. 1933

Appendix 3: Bibliography of Writings About William Heath Robinson

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"A Maker of Absurdities; the Humorous Drawings of W. Heath Robinson." London Magazine, XX (1908), 626.

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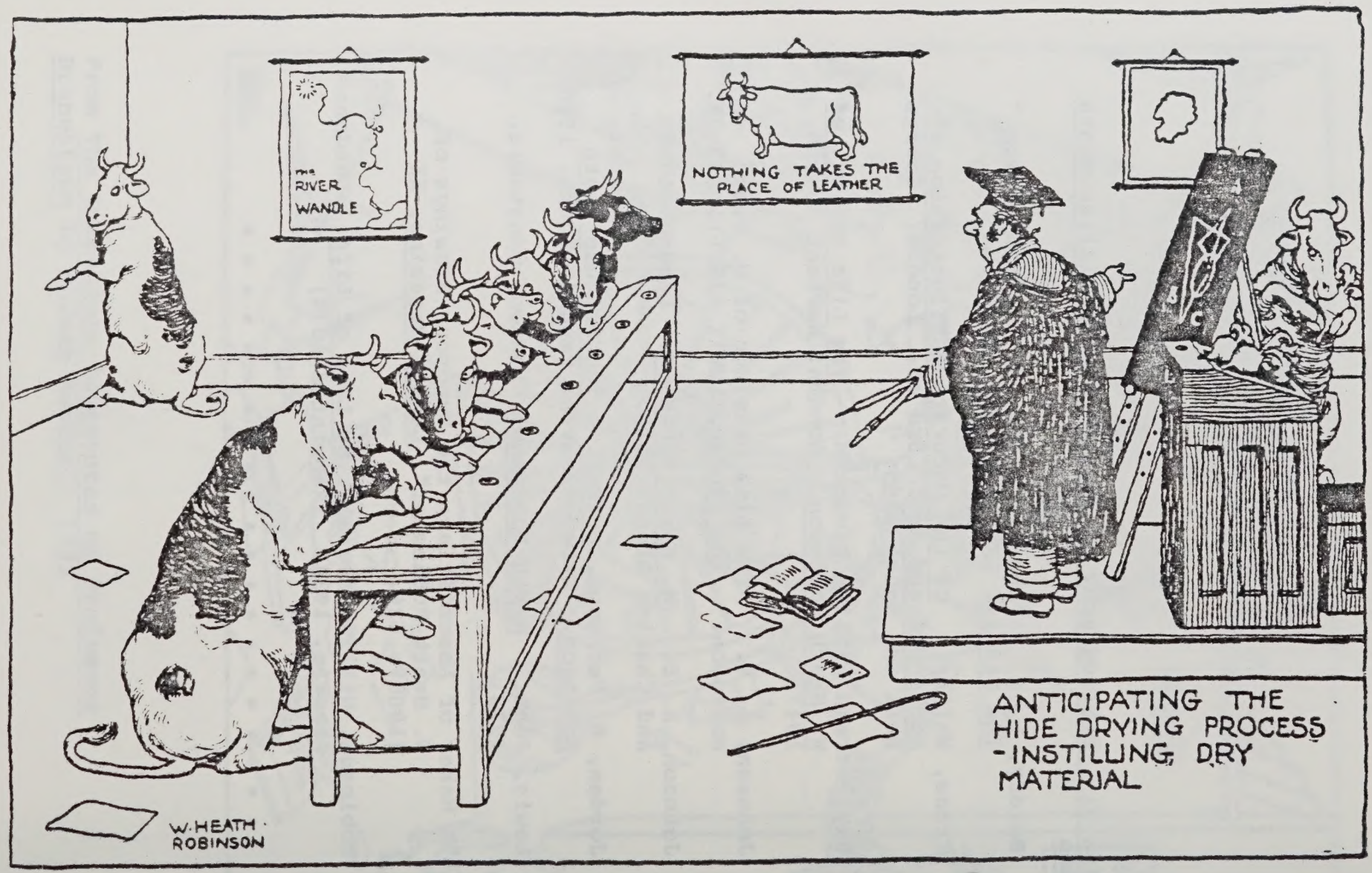
the RIVER WANDLE
NOTHING TAKES THE PLACE OF LEATHER
ANTICIPATING THE HIDE DRYING PROCESS - INSTILLING DRY MATERIAL
W. HEATH ROBINSON

A Drawing Produced for Connolly Bros. (Curriers)

VOLUME I. AUGUST, 1914 NUMBER 6

Advertising the City Dairy Company of Toronto

Note on Illustrations

The full page illustrations in this guide are captioned; others are taken from books as follows:-

Front cover: Adapted from an illustrations in A Midsummer Night's Dream
Title page: Then and Now (Port of Manchester Warehouses)
Verso of title page: Bill the Minder
Page 3: The Adventures of Uncle Lubin
Page 15: Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales
Back cover: Bill the Minder